

April 25, 2021

Easter 4

Psalm 23/John 10:11-18

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“Another pathetic sheep following the herd,” the man on the TV commercial used to say, Eeyore-like in his inflection.

On social media today, you get called out for being a ‘sheeple’--not really in a humorous way but a derogatory way of referring to those who are judged to be docile, compliant, and easily influenced into doing outrageous things like wearing masks...Being too “sheep-like” is bad.

And yet, here we are on another Good Shepherd Sunday. It is a part of our liturgical calendar every year in the Easter season--we hear and also sing the much loved Psalm 23 in a number of different ways today, and the Gospel is always from the tenth chapter of John. In this chapter, Jesus takes the images of shepherd and sheep and turns them, first one way and then another: “I am the gate for the sheep; I am the gatekeeper; I am the Good Shepherd; my sheep hear my voice; there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

There is something about this very concrete image of shepherd and sheep that speaks to us across the millennia since the 23rd Psalm was first recited, perhaps next to a campfire in a Middle Eastern desert. We are *so* far removed from that, and yet from faith formation classrooms to nursing home bedsides, we say it from memory. We *want* that shepherd in the dark valley; and we want those green pastures and soul restoration. But it seems we can't have all of that without becoming *a sheep*.

In last Sunday's New York Times, there was a special section called *Who Are We Now*. They invited readers to submit photos and brief essays about who they feel they are after this pandemic year. A few of the essays were printed in their entirety, but mostly there were just short quotes from people, struck me how divergent they were:

I care more about being with people who make me feel whole now one man wrote.
The pandemic scraped away all the facades we've built around our lives.

Another woman said: *The pandemic is the meditation I never wanted, but have come to appreciate. That said, last week I kicked a hole in the bathroom door. And then there was this: I am not going to be polite anymore. All the rules I have followed, these rules will not save me.*

And this: *Nobody will take care of me other than myself.*

Amazing, isn't it, how one "shared" experience--this worldwide pandemic--has shaped us in so many contrasting ways. Depending on who we are and what we've experienced, we see ourselves more connected, or more disconnected; more caring, or more callous. You wonder, don't you, how all of it will continue to shape us and shape our world in the years ahead--I'm guessing that prompt *Who Are We Now* is one we've all thought about.

Sheep, we can assume, don't have the luxury or maybe the need of self-reflection. A shepherd guides you and keeps you safe; you eat and sleep; when you wander too far or try to go a different direction, a dog herds you back; lambs get special care sometimes; the details are taken care of; and you spend your life not being alone, but being part of a flock. The shepherd *and* the flock shelter your vulnerability.

If we hear "The Lord is my shepherd," and find our throats tightening a bit, we are acknowledging that we *are* sheep--sheep--in need of care in our lives; frequent wanderers, although we like to pretend that we stick to the path; scattered easily by fear, prejudice, and greed; often so forgetful that our lives are tied to so many others--that the vulnerability and the love or hate that another person experiences is ours, too, affecting *our* lives, *our* hopes for ourselves and for those who come after us.

When we join together in worship to pray for forgiveness and to remember the waters of our baptism, we are recognizing how badly we need a Shepherd. How turned in on ourselves we become, how much we need the love of Christ which embraces us, promises new beginnings, and sends us to share that love.

Sends us to share that love--it sounds so simple, doesn't it--and yet the living out of it is so difficult for us, so complicated by all we do and don't do; all we say and

don't say; all we think and believe about ourselves and other people. For almost a year our country has been reeling under and reckoning with the effects of racism after George Floyd's death. Blaming the victim, prayer, repentance, protest, refusal to acknowledge the reality of deeply rooted prejudice, tears, brutality, and anger have been just a part of the roller coaster. How do we learn to love one another?

This week there was a heavy sigh of relief as justice was done and a murderer was convicted. But as so many have said, and as we saw just this week, injustice is still the norm for so many people of color. The flock--*our human* flock, not somehow *their* flock--is suffering again and again. In 1st Corinthians Paul says "If one suffers, all suffer together," and in our reading today from 1st John we heard "Little children, let us love not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

This engagement for the sake of others and for our world is not based in politics--it's at the heart of our faith. Faith in a loving Christ that can't somehow be disconnected from the reality of the culture and community all around us. We are sent to Christ's love.

"There will be one flock," Jesus says, "one shepherd."